

Bistro worker accused of stealing campaign signs in Pinole

Contra Costa Times

January 24, 2008

By Tom Lochner

Police arrested a Pear Street Bistro employee early Wednesday on suspicion of petty theft after he admitted removing signs advocating a recall of two Pinole City Council members from the Park View Plaza shopping center across the street, police said.

In addition to taking down signs that urge voters to recall Councilwoman Maria Alegria and Councilman Stephen Tilton, the 24-year-old bistro worker also removed a sign from the campaign of Debbie Long, police said. Long is running for an open council seat and has publicly advocated a recall. Campaign signs of her rival, Ivette Ricco, as well as several other signs of replacement candidates for the recall targets, appeared undisturbed Wednesday.

Shortly after midnight, a resident reported seeing someone take down some political signs and enter the bistro building, Pinole police Cmdr. Paul Clancy said. Police contacted the man at the bistro, Clancy said.

"He admitted to our officers that he took the signs and threw them in the Dumpster behind the building," Clancy said.

Police photographed the signs, a total of four, which Clancy described as a "Yes Recall" sign; a Debbie Long sign; another recall-related sign; and a sign for Roy Swearingen, who is running as a replacement candidate for Alegria on Feb. 5 in case she loses on the recall question.

The resident who contacted police was Dave Vida, a member of recall sponsor Concerned Citizens of Pinole who said he watched the theft take place from about 100 yards away.

"He had his hands full," Vida said of the suspect. "I was fortunate in that as I was pulling out to drive down to confront the person ... a Pinole police car was making its rounds and passed me."

Vida flagged down the car, and he and the officer went to the bistro, where Vida pointed out the suspect through a window.

The bistro employee, a San Pablo resident, was cited for petty theft and released on his own recognizance, Clancy said. As far as whether the employee acted on his own initiative, Clancy said the man had made a statement and police are investigating further.

Bistro worker accused of stealing . . . 2

Vida said the fourth sign belonged to Steve Denlis, a second replacement candidate for Alegria.

Long, contacted Wednesday, said: "On the surface, it may seem like petty theft, but in the big picture it may be tampering with elections."

Alegria and Tilton face recall elections Feb. 5 for, among other reasons, their friendship with Pear Street Bistro owner Gary Wong, who for two years failed to make payments on more than \$400,000 in city loans.

More than a half-dozen signs remained at Park View Plaza on Wednesday, including a "Yes Recall" sign and signs belonging to Ricco, Long, Swearingen and Virginia Fujita, the lone replacement candidate for Tilton if he is recalled.

Contacted about the sign removal Wednesday, Alegria said: "I have no knowledge what this is about. My campaign has nothing to do with that."

"That's one of the reasons why I didn't put up any campaign signs," Alegria added. "It presents opportunities for folks just to vandalize them."

Long, Swearingen and Denlis have complained repeatedly about their signs being stolen.

Long said she has lost about 30 signs and that she contacted police about three weeks ago after more than a dozen of her signs disappeared in Old Town and on San Pablo Avenue.

"Twenty or 30 signs affect me greatly," she said. She said she bought a minimum order of 100 signs from a union shop for just under \$1,200.

She complained that many of her removed signs were replaced by Ricco signs. Ricco said she, too, has lost signs, and she condemned such theft.

"I think it's ridiculous for people to do that," Ricco said. "If somebody gets caught doing it, they should be prosecuted."

She said she did not know any of her signs were up at Park View Plaza and that it appears "someone has moved signs from another location."

"I have not received permission, nor have I asked, to put up signs at Park View Plaza," Ricco said.

Denlis said he has lost more than 65 signs.

"It is a shame that opposition is so polarized, that they would resort to trampling on the free speech rights of myself, and the property owners that have given me permission to display my signs," Denlis said in a statement.

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